

A problem racial and cultural critique in richard wright' works

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“ Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white. And if he were holding his gun in his hand, nobody could run over him; they would have to respect him” (Wright). Richard Wright was an American writer born in Roxie, Mississippi in 1908.

Many of Wright’s works have to do with African American culture, including a poem about lynching. He even spoke at the American Writer’s Congress about “ The Isolation of the Negro Writer” (Richard Wright). One of his writings is called *The Man Who Was Almost a Man*. It is mainly about an African American boy named Dave who is living with his mother and father in the South. He was smaller than the other workers in the field and felt that he needed a way to prove himself as a man. Dave pleads with his mother to let him buy a gun because he believes this is what will make him a man.

As the story goes on, Dave ends up accidentally shooting a mule belonging to a man he works for. He gets in trouble and comes to realize in the end that he was never really old enough for the gun in the first place. Using racial/cultural criticism, the reader can analyze Richard Wright’s *The Man Who Was Almost a Man* through character, dialogue, and symbol. First, when reading this story, it can be analyzed through character. The character that portrays the most in terms of racial/cultural criticism would be Dave.

One example is when Dave says, “ Whut’s the use talkin wid em niggers in the field?” (Wright). This statement shows that Dave is a very uneducated child. While he knows the language he is speaking, he doesn’t know how to use proper grammar or sentence structure. It is obvious that he has never

attended school. This goes to show how African Americans were treated at this time in the south.

Education was not readily available to them at this time. For the sake of the story, it also shows that Dave feels inferior to the other workers in the field, and is quick to insult them because of this. Another example is the simple statement, "Waal, Ahma buy a gun" (Wright). This shows that his intentions of buying a gun are very strong. He is certain that this is what he wants to do.

He wants very badly to feel like a man and he thinks he can accomplish this by having a gun. Back in this time and area, guns were a sign of strength, and strength was a sign of manhood. Especially for the African Americans who never had the chance to be educated. They had nothing else to prove themselves because they lacked the necessary intelligence to do so. Basically, Dave's character in this story is a strong example of the culture and race of the time period in which it was written.

The second way this story can be analyzed with racial/cultural criticism is through dialogue. This is perhaps the strongest way to criticize this story because the dialogue between characters is so realistic. The first example would be when Dave says, "Shucks, Ah ain scareda them even ef they are biggem me!" (Wright). This type of dialogue indicates that the characters in this story are living in a place where education wasn't very important or at least available to them. Also, they were probably allowed less education because of the fact they were black.

If Dave had the chance to attend school even part time, his grammar would be much more developed than this. Another example includes when he says, "How duh, Mistah Joe?" (Wright). Not only does this quote show that the boy is uneducated and has poor grammar, but it shows that he is somewhat afraid of the store manager. He speaks to him as his superior, and this probably isn't because he is his elder. It is probably because he is a white man. Although slavery may have been ended at this time, there was most definitely the illusion that white people were more powerful or better than black people.

This is a great example of the culture and racism of the time period in which Wright wrote this story. The last way that this story can be analyzed through racial/cultural criticism is through the use of symbolism. While there are a few symbols portrayed in the story, the one with the most power would be the gun. For example, the author writes, "If he had a gun like that he would polish it and keep it shining so it would never rust," (Richard Wright). The boy in this story sort of sees having the gun as being a man.

To him, the gun is a symbol of his manhood. He knows that if he had the chance to be a man, he would stand up to that responsibility and portray himself as the best man he could. Another way in which the author creates symbolism with the gun would be when he says, "And if he were holding his gun in his hand, nobody could run over him; they would have to respect him," (Richard Wright). David knows no other way to act like a man, and this is probably because he isn't a man yet. He doesn't have what it takes to be a man simply because he is still a boy and has a lot of growing up to do.

Because of this, Dave sees having a gun as a way out. It is a simple and quick fix to becoming a man. Dave knows that holding the gun in his hand makes others view him as powerful. He also knows that being viewed as powerful allows him to be viewed as a man. The gun in this story is a definite symbol of manhood. In conclusion, one can analyze *The Man Who Was Almost a Man* through racial/cultural criticism by using character, dialogue, and symbol.

This story is a great portrayal of African American life in the south at this time. The moral of the story is very influential and powerful; but more than that, it teaches about an entire time period. It helps to better understand the reasoning behind the way the author and others alike wrote.